today

No. 134

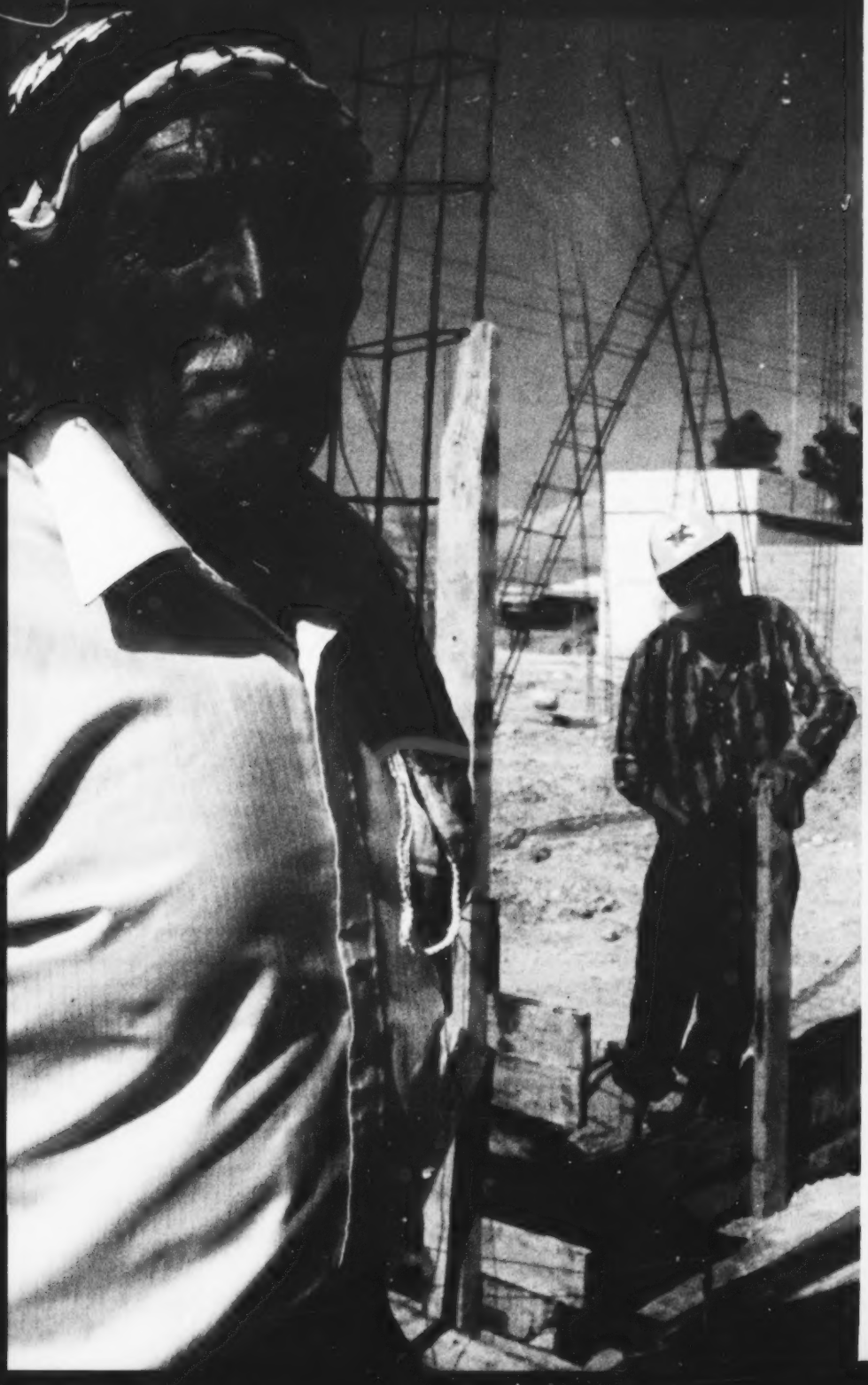
A JOURNALIST'S IMPRESSIONS

ABDEL JOINS IN ...

PHOTO FEATURE

A WEEK IN BEIRUT

WEST BANK



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Mahmoud Al-Najar, a resident of Aqabat Jabr camp in the West Bank, at the site of the housing unit that UNRWA is building for him under the Agency´s shelter rehabilitation programme.

Beach camp, Gaza Strip.

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"Welcome to Gaza"

Peter Wills, a British freelance journalist and filmmaker, first visited Gaza in 1990 on a journalism assignment. Three years later, he returned. Wills wrote this story especially for ***Palestine Refugees Today.***

The sign says "Welcome to Gaza," but now the sign over the road as you enter the Gaza Strip from Erez checkpoint between Gaza and Israel seemed even more ironic and forlorn. As the smoke from the burning tyres ascended from those vaguely familiar streets which had splintered into hundreds of newsreel images over the years, an almost palpable feeling of despair took over.

There was a look of desperation on the faces of the Palestinians in the camps. It was as if the closing of the border with Israel had not only dealt an economic blow to the heart of the area but had sapped the resistance of the people as well. Where there had been vitality, there was now quiet desperation.

My last visit had been in 1990, just before the Gulf War. This time I noticed many changes – all of them for the worse. Three years ago there had been fear of the future, a lull, before Desert Storm, but this was combined with a kind of reckless optimism, that the chips were finally to be called in, the bluff called on the world's stage. At last the Palestinian problem would be discussed and the rest of the world would have to take notice.

But now, with Gaza sealed off like a vast prison camp, fear of hunger and hardship stalked the narrow alleys of the camps as the all too fragile economy wound down.

THE WORLD MOVES ON...

The world too seemed to have moved on since 1990. The media circus had shut up shop and decamped to new wars and new disasters – Bosnia and Somalia. Gaza had become the worst of all possible scenarios – it had become unfashionable. It was not as if the story itself had diminished. The statistics showed that Palestinians were suffering as never before. It just seemed that the West had grown weary.

The aid agencies appeared to be suffering too. UNRWA, with a $28.5 million deficit for 1993, was faced with the hard choice of deciding which essential services to axe at a time when hardship was increasing

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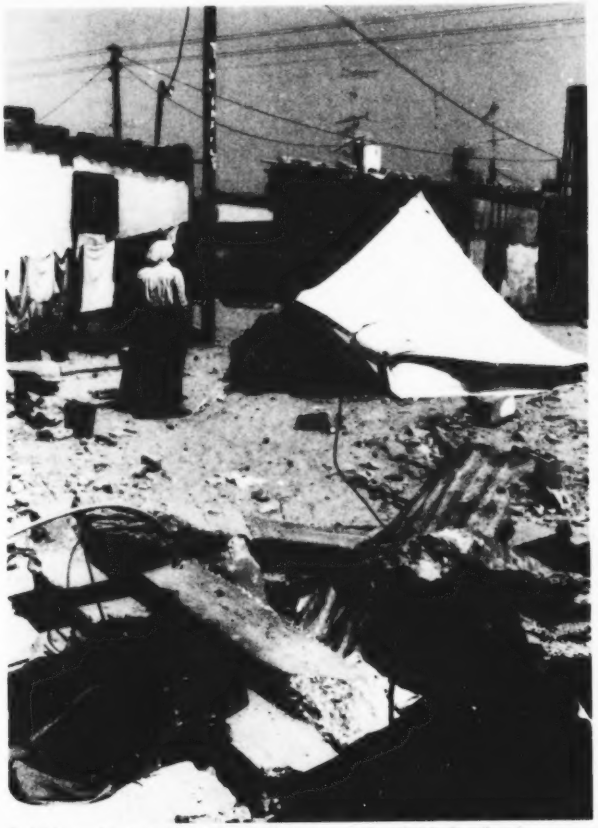
rapidly. The Palestinians showed their anger by occupying the Gaza field headquarters while I was there and demanding rations. An UNRWA staff member's car was set on fire in a separate incident. Fear born of desperation was the new mood in Gaza.



Rubble and twisted metal are all that remain of this family's home. Temporary accommodation is a tent provided by UNRWA.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

One of the new developments was the random demolition of houses or shelters said to be hiding wanted persons. To bypass the process of posting applications with the subsequent right of appeal, the IDF had decided that houses which hid suspects could be flattened as a "military act."

I spoke to farmer Zaki Murad, 32, who sat among the rubble of the dream home he had built over the years in Gaza town. He had sunk his life savings into the house. One morning Zaki, his wife and eight children were told to leave because a wanted person was said to live in the apartment block.

"I don't know who he was. None of us knew. We were led away and then we heard the explosions. When we came back we found this..." He pointed to his completely gutted house.

The Israelis had strafed the building from a nearby roof. Zaki crouched in the wreckage and looked numbly at the charred pages from a child's atlas. "Why do they do it? Why?" he asked. Now the family and the rest of the hundred or so people who live in the block are accommodated in temporary tents supplied by UNRWA and the Palestinian Red Crescent.

But perhaps the most chilling development of recent months has been the shooting of children by snipers from Military Observation Posts in the camps.

Dr. Ibrahim Masoud, 32, runs the UNRWA Rimal Health Centre near Beach Camp. The clinic is often in the thick of clashes and the prevailing wind blows the tear gas into the building affecting both staff and patients. "There are more soldiers everywhere in the camp. They attack women, children, doctors, UNRWA staff – nobody is safe. In the clinics, because of the general deterioration in sanitation there are more parasites and diseases – and now there's going to be hunger because there's no money. "It's worse than the *intifadah*, much worse. People are beginning to lose hope."

A colleague, Dr. Ibrahim El Bursh agreed. "They attack the doctors now. I've had my stethoscope ripped away while I was attending a patient."

Dr. El Bursh was on duty when a 12-year-old boy was shot through the heart while playing on the clinic roof. "It was strange. There was no stone throwing – nothing. Usually you hear the children breaking stones, but there was nothing else going on. When I heard the shot, I went to help, but the Israelis on the Post wouldn't let us go onto the roof. The boy was lying there for ten minutes. Ten minutes. It was terrible. In the end a young boy pulled him down by the legs.

"The injured boy's pupils were half-dilated and he was gasping for air. He died later in hospital but he might have been saved if we could have got to him earlier," Dr. El Bursh added.

WAITING FOR NEWS

Another example was five-year-old Nidal Mehsen. On May 6 Nidal left the Beach Camp kindergarten early because it was a strike day. As he went through the school gates a

VIOLENCE TAKES ITS TOLL

During the first six months of 1993, UNRWA recorded 123 Palestinian fatalities in the occupied territory by Israeli forces, including 25 children under the age of 15. Over 3,000 were injured, including 2,232 by live ammunition, and including more than 1,000 children under the age of 15. During the month of May, 29 people were killed by security forces in the Gaza Strip, the highest number of fatalities in a single month since the *intifadah* began nearly five years ago. Over 90 homes were damaged or destroyed in the past year by Israeli forces using explosives or anti-tank rockets against houses where wanted persons were suspected to be hiding. UNRWA provided tents, foodstuffs and other emergency supplies to more than 120 families made homeless by these operations.

shot rang out. His eight-year-old companion Ahmed Mudallal fell to the ground clutching his leg. As the other children ran to help, a second shot was fired from the Israeli observation post some 100 metres away. Nidal was hit just below the left eye.

He was taken to Shifa Hospital and, because the wound was difficult to treat, he was later transferred to the Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem – a rare event for a Palestinian child.

Nidal's parents, Rowaida and Mahmoud Mehsen, were waiting at home for their son when they heard the news that there had been a shooting. "We ran to the hospital but it was difficult to get information," Mahmoud said. "What is it when they shoot children? He was on his way home to play with his brothers and sisters. He was doing nothing. He wouldn't hurt anybody," Rowaida said.

Both parents were denied permits by the Israeli authorities to visit their son –perhaps it was connected with the time Mahmoud had been in prison for various offences. The 80-year-old grandmother had to go. The family asked me if I could get any news since I was going to Jerusalem the next day.

Hadassah is a huge Israeli hospital in northern Jerusalem. Unlike the camp clinics, it is a temple to the latest medical technology. Nidal was in the eye ward on the fourth floor. The Israeli surgeon showed me the wound. The bullet had smashed the bone beneath the left eye, he explained. They would have to operate soon, but they couldn't until the swelling had subsided.

A Palestinian mother points at the scar left on her son's face by a rubber bullet injury.

A DESPERATELY SICK BOY

"The optic nerve may be damaged and if the eye goes we will have to take it out as sometimes it infects the other," the doctor said. Nidal turned away tired of all the attention, a desperately sick boy.

It was difficult not to reflect that when the rhetoric of all the peace talks in the corridors of power has died down and the screaming headline have faded, the end result is an innocent five-year-old schoolboy, in an alien hospital ward, turning his face to the wall.

Gaza in 1993 is a sobering place.

A 10-year-old boy beaten by Israeli soldiers receives treatment at an UNRWA clinic.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF CLOSURE

Some 120,000 Palestinians were barred from working in Israel when the Israeli government closed the West Bank and Gaza Strip at the end of March 1993. As of July 1993, some 40-50,000 Palestinians had been issued permits to take up work in Israel, but the consequences of the closure have hit hard.

The closure has caused Palestinian unemployment – already estimated at between 25 and 40 per cent – to rise even further. Daily wage losses in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the initial stages of the closure were estimated at US $2.75 million. Israeli government statistics have indicated that per capita income in the Gaza Strip dropped by over one third between 1987 and 1991. The closure has accelerated this trend.

Prices of certain locally grown agricultural products have dropped by as much as 90 per cent since the closure was imposed as access to outside markets has been cut off. This has resulted in a glut in local markets at a time when people cannot afford to buy. Families were reported to be selling personal jewelry, a traditional form of savings, as well as other household goods in order to buy food. UNRWA responded with emergency distribution of imported food items such as flour and rice to over 120,000 families most in need in the Gaza Strip and 39,000 families in the West Bank.

Abdel joins in...

An elementary boys school in Baqa'a Camp, Jordan is the location for an Agency initiative to bring children with disabilities into regular school classes. Suad Alwan, UNRWA's Disability Programme Officer in Jordan, reports on the success story so far.

Abdel Mue'z leads his schoolmates to class in the morning.

The children walked in line towards the classroom. On the way Abdel Mue'z and Yousef were slow. The teacher politely asked them to speed up, but Abdel Mue'z fell down and was about to cry when many of his peers helped him to stand up. Together, they all walked into the classroom as if nothing had happened. Abdel Mue'z and Yousef have cerebral palsy.

"I always thought these children should be with their peers, for their emotional and psychological well being," says Mr. Darwish. He is the teacher who agreed to be the first to mainstream children with cerebral palsy in an elementary class among 46 other children at UNRWA's third Elementary School for Boys in Baqa'a Camp, Jordan.

"Prevention, Rehabilitation and Equalization of Opportunities" are the three slogans for this modest programme for disabled children in Baqa'a camp. Nevertheless "a lot has been done in the field of mainstreaming children with disabilities in schools and teenagers in vocational training and women programme centres," says Mr. Abu Hasheesh, the supervisor of the community rehabilitation centre and the member of the local committee for the rehabilitation of disabled people in Baqa'a camp.

BEGINNING THE EXPERIMENT

During the 1992-1993 school year, the centre, in cooperation with head teachers, teachers and the medical officer, re-integrated two deaf children, two children with physical problems and two children with cerebral palsy in a school in the camp. The Medical Officer in UNRWA health centre checks the medical fitness of each child and can recommend his or her enrolment in a regular school.

The rehabilitation centre worked intensively for several months to prepare children for their integration into regular schools. When he saw the progress of the children, the Medical Officer endorsed the recommendation that some of the children go to school.

Before the children with disabilities started at the regular school, the special educationalist working for the disability programme visited the school several times. He talked to the teachers and children, laying the ground for the children to enter the first elementary class.

In his own words, Mr. Darwish "accepted the challenge." His own son has cerebral palsy. "Now three children with special needs are in my class. They are seated among the other 44 pupils."

Mr. Darwish admitted that there were problems at the beginning of the year since "some pupils were not very accepting about the presence of the disabled children and tried to point out their disabilities."

> "In the classroom, all the children look the same."

IN THE PLAYGROUND

In the playground a large crowd of children were gathered around Abdel Mue'z and Yousef, the two children with cerebral palsy. When

Jordan

Abdel Mue'z (in foreground) is keen to learn.

asked to point out his friends, Abdel waved his hand. "All of them!"

"In the classroom, all the children look the same," says Asma, the rehabilitation worker at the centre who followed up the children in their school. Classmates said they enjoyed having Abdel Mue'z in their class. When asked why, the boys gave different answers. Some said, "he is a boy like the rest of us," while others remarked, "he studies and plays with us."

"I am not surprised that Abdel Mue'z has such a good time with all the others. He was the most sociable child in the centre," says Fardos, the rehabilitation worker who spent time with Abdel Mue'z in the centre. Abdel Mue'z came almost every day for three years to the rehabilitation centre in Baqa'a where he learned to speak and walk. When Abdel Mue'z was transferred from the centre to school, both his teachers and his old classmates said they missed him terribly.

Now, both Abdel Mue'z and Yousef visit the rehabilitation centre twice a week to keep up with their rehabilitation programme. It's a constant battle. They work hard doing their physiotherapy exercises as well as their spelling and pronunciation sessions.

ENTHUSIASM AT HOME

Their friends at the centre tell the rehabilitation workers that they also want the chance to attend a regular school. But as one teacher says, "these children profit a lot from their presence in a regular classroom, but academically speaking, I am not sure whether some of them will be able to match the results of their classmates. In a class with 50 pupils, teachers in regular schools simply don't have enough time to devote extra time to pupils with special needs."

The children's enthusiasm at school also spills over into their homes. They ask for help with their homework from sisters or mothers and happily tell the stories they hear at school.

Yousef's father still isn't sure whether it is better for his son to be at school or in the community rehabilitation centre, but realizes that Yousef is happier at his new school and thinks that he is no longer labeled as "disabled" when he spent his entire day at the rehabilitation centre. Abdel Mue'z admitted that he likes to visit the centre to do his exercises, but he wouldn't want to stay there all day. "I want to be in school with Yousef and the others."

CHANGING ATTITUDES

Abdel Mue'z and Yousef were lucky to find people who accepted them wholeheartedly. Many other children with less severe disabilities have not had a similar chance. Changing the attitudes of people anywhere can be a slow process.

Physiotherapy at an UNRWA rehabilitation centre in Jordan.

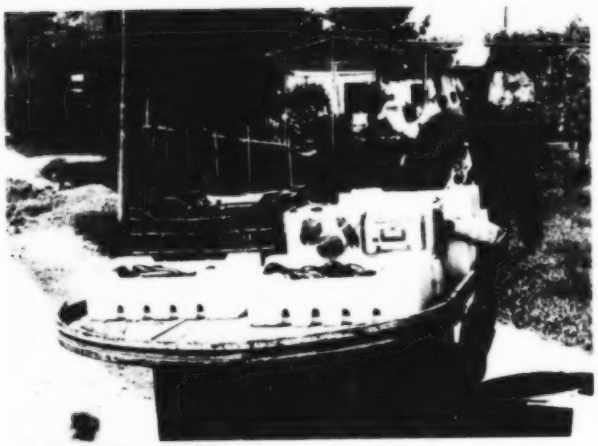
UNRWA INITIATIVES ON DISABILITY

UNRWA began efforts to mainstream children with disabilities into regular classes in 1991. The programme was expanded during the 1992-93 school year in cooperation with the health and education staff of UNRWA. An increasing number of children and teenagers are being "mainstreamed". UNRWA education specialists, disability programme officers, rehabilitation workers and members of locally trained committees are co-ordinating follow-up in locations where Community Rehabilitation Centres are operating.

Following a joint UNRWA-NGO conference in Amman which recommended new policy and programme initiatives on community rehabilitation and other programmes for disabled Palestine refugees, the Agency adopted a policy on disability which emphasizes prevention, rehabilitation and equalization of opportunities.

Learning– a costly luxury

Learning among the rubble



Atiyeh with his vegetable cart

Lost schooling due to war, displacement and poverty has left hundreds of Palestine refugee families in Lebanon with very little chance of improving their circumstances. Palestine Refugees Today *visited one family.*

Twenty two-year-old Atiyeh Hijazi pushes a vegetable cart with his one arm through the deserted roads of Bar Elias village in Lebanon's Beqa'a Valley. In this country, scarred by disability and poverty, you could easily walk past him without a second thought.

DISPLACED FOUR TIMES.

Born near Nabatieh, South Lebanon in 1970, Atiyeh is the fifth of eight children. None of them finished school – the family was displaced four times. Between 1971 and 1973, Nabatieh refugee camp was systematically bombed to the ground by Israeli air strikes and the family fled north to the village of Sheheem. Atiyeh started school in 1977 but in 1982 the Israeli invasion into Lebanon threw everything into disorder. He missed two years of school and his father fell ill. With no breadwinner, 12-year-old Atiyeh started to work as a labourer to support the family. The family was once again displaced, from Sheheem to the Beqa'a valley, in the aftermath of the 1982 invasion and his father's condition grew worse.

TRAGEDY STRIKES AGAIN

By 1988, Atiyeh was earning a living plastering the walls of mud-brick shelters. At 18, education had passed him by. He thought he was too old and the family too much in need for him to return to school. Then tragedy struck again. A shell exploded near him and he lost his left arm. After the trauma of displacement, poverty and parental illness, which cost him his schooling, came the trauma of disability, which narrowed his chances for better-paid work. Soon after, his father died.

Today, Atiyeh's "home" is a small, dark chamber in a dilapidated building that passed for a clinic many years ago. It is known locally as the "hospital for the displaced" because 47 displaced Palestinian families have settled there. Atiyeh, his mother, Fatimah, two sisters and another brother share this sparsely furnished space.

Fatimah makes coffee and sits on the floor. Amineh, her 21-year-old daughter, joins her. She's a little younger than Atiyeh, less shy and clearly as much in charge of the household as her mother. Brother Mahmoud is two years younger than Atiyeh, and looks boyish with his frizzy reddish hair and pale complexion.

"WE ABANDONED SCHOOL TO WORK"

The discussion focussed on their education, or lack of it. "We left school early to work," said the shy and slightly confused Atiyeh. "Our father's long illness and our difficult financial situation made it necessary for us all to work to take care of him and each other."

Did he regret having missed school?

"Yes," he said unhesitantly, as though he knew what he should answer. "I think it might have helped me get a better job. I didn't earn much as a labourer and working as a barrow vendor often brings nothing. Sometimes the authorities prevent us from peddling on the streets."

Would he go to an adult education centre if he had the chance? Atiyeh could not answer. It was as though he was being asked to comment on something completely alien to him.

What about a better job?

"It would be good if I had a small business," he said. "But I don't have the money."

What sort of business?

Again, Atiyeh could not answer. An UNRWA social worker working in the area said that he had suggested that Atiyeh open a small chicken roastery. Atiyeh was worried that he would not be able to cope because of his disability.

Both Aminah and Mahmoud said they regretted not continuing their schooling. Aminah particularly regretted that Atiyeh was unable — and Mahmoud refused— to return to school. "If they [the boys] had stayed in school," she said, "the rest of us [the girls] would have tried to take care of things until they finished."

What about education for women? Didn't women need to be educated?

Aminah smiled and nodded. She said that her sister Miriam had enrolled in a brief literacy course, and could read and write a little.

What would she need for her to consider learning again?

"I think that if we had a decent shelter, a stable home with basic facilities, then I could concentrate," she said. "I might work during the day, as a maid or something, and then come home where I could rest instead of doing domestic work. Then there would be time to think about other things, even learning."

A damaged UNRWA classroom

THE LUXURY OF SCHOOL

"Even learning", – those two words were pointers to the family's plight. Displacement, poverty, sickness and trauma had brought about a situation where they could only consider education a luxury, a pastime for those who could afford it, even if education was provided free of charge. The tragedy of Atiyeh, Mahmoud, Aminah and many other Palestine refugees who missed out on schooling, was that on their own, they seemed to have no way of knowing whether – or how – to begin again.

UNRWA: REBUILDING EDUCATION IN LEBANON

UNRWA runs 41 elementary and 35 preparatory schools in Lebanon with a total student population of more than 33,000. The years of conflict had a disastrous effect on the programme. Students and teachers were killed, injured or displaced, school buildings were damaged or destroyed.

When the Government of Lebanon re-introduced its official examination, the Brevet, in August 1991 after a gap of 16 years, only 16 per cent of UNRWA students passed. The Agency quickly introduced remedial measures and lengthened the normal school day. One year later the pass rate for the same exam shot up to 57 per cent.

Asked to comment on this article, UNRWA Senior Education Officer Fawzi Abu Ghali at Vienna Headquarters told *Palestine Refugees Today* that it was a "true reflection of the devastating impact that the disruption of the educational process has had on the lives of many Palestinians in Lebanon, especially in the past two decades. There can be no effective education without security and stability."

AQABAT JABR

Market scene in Aqabat Jabr in the mid 1950's. Just under 20,000 refugees fled from different areas of southern Palestine to Aqabat Jabr during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. Most travelled more than 100 kilometres with a few basic belongings from Jaffa, Lydda, Ramleh and Hebron. Initially they lived in tents provided by aid agencies. UNRWA took over the main responsibility for the refugees' welfare in 1950 and replaced the tents with mud-brick shelters.

Refugee women carry water home in earthenware jars. The refugees were drawn to the area by plentiful spring water. One of the most abundant springs, known as Elisha's fountain, provided water for the camp, as it had done 6,000 years previously for the ancient town of Jericho.

Refugees flee to Jordan over the bombshelled Allenby bridge during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

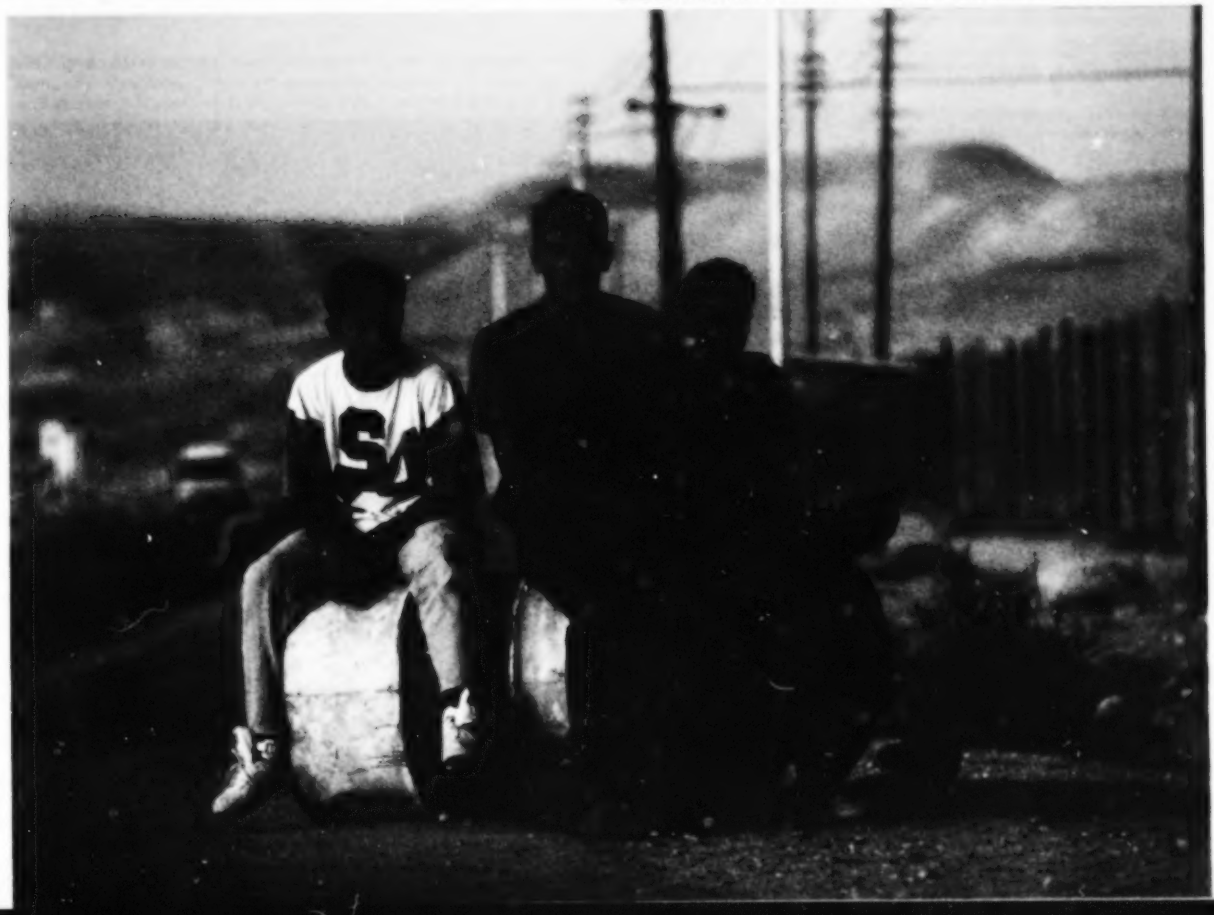
Aqabat Jabr camp on the border of Jordan and the Israeli-occupied West Bank, has seen waves of Palestine refugees come and go since its establishment in 1948. During the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 its population dropped from 28,000 to 2,300 almost overnight as thousands of refugees were displaced for a second time, this time to Jordan. Today, this cluster of mud brick houses in the Jordan valley has the air of a depressed frontier town. The pace of life is slow. Unemployment is rife. The hot summer sun burns up the vegetation mercilessly. The only respite is the spring-fed oasis town of Jericho, three kilometres away. Palestine Refugees Today *documented the camp, past and present, in a series of photographs.*

The camp today.

A young camp resident looks out over a grafitti-covered wall. These political slogans and instructions, the public information system of the *intifadah*, have become a regular feature of walls all over the occupied territory.

Unemployed men in discussion. Hundreds of well-trained young people have never had the chance to use their skills. They have no choice but to work as labourers on building sites, factories or fields, if they can find jobs at all.

Young Palestinians wait on the road for an early morning lift to Jerusalem, hoping to find work. Since the closure of the occupied territory at the end of March, unemployment has rocketed to about 50 per cent due to Israeli restrictions on Palestinians working in Israel and on movement between Gaza, the West Bank and Israel.



Fatmeh (centre) with her daughter and blind mother in front of their new three-room shelter, built for them by UNRWA.

Derelict houses, devoid of their original inhabitants, still remain. Many families still live in the original shelters of Aqabat Jabr – built of mud decades ago for the desert conditions of the Jordan valley. But damage from recent winter storms has been severe. UNRWA's shelter rehabilitation project has identified houses that need to be demolished, repaired or rebuilt and aims to provide better housing for refugee residents. The Agency only had funds to rehabilitate 30 shelters in the camp in 1992.

Children working at one of the cement block factories in the camp. Child labour is a direct result of worsening economic conditions. The small wage that children earn helps families to stay above the poverty line.

Excavation begins on the foundations of a new housing unit. Mohammed (driving) bought the bulldozer with a low-interest loan of US$ 25,000 given to him under UNRWA's income generation scheme. The scheme supports Palestinian businesses with low interest loans in order to create jobs and stimulate economic growth in the occupied territory.

Theebeh and her husband. Originally from Deir Yassin, both survived the killings that took place in April 1948 when Israeli commandos stormed their village.

An UNRWA doctor examines a young patient at the Agency health centre. Like UNRWA clinics all over the Middle East, the Aqabat Jabr centre provides preventive and curative medical care free of charge to registered Palestine refugees.

The Nakhleh logo - "I read"

Passports - to reading

A Palestinian non-governmental organization is helping thousands of youngsters in the occupied territory to rediscover the joys of reading.

West Bank

Only 13-year-old Saji was not in the spirit of what promised to be a special day. His young companions from the camp were running around excitedly. Some were adding extra chairs in the community centre turned community theatre; others kept a lookout at the entrance to the camp. This day was to be a day of festivity for children, and for adults too, at Fara'a refugee camp in the north of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Nakhleh Ash-Shiber was coming to town.

Two Palestinian actors created Nakhleh Ash-Shiber. This imaginary character has become a living hero in the occupied territory, the "teenage mutant ninja turtle" of Palestine in children's eyes. His natural gift is his ability to communicate complicated ideas simply and spontaneously. For Palestinians, Nakhleh is no-one and everyone at the same time. His popularity is due not only to his way of presenting everyday situations that Palestinians experience, but also because he stimulates their imagination and creativity.

A BUNDLE OF CONTRADICTIONS

Nakhleh is, as he claims, a bundle of contradictions. Even his own name reflects the inherent contradiction in everything he does. His name literally means "the palm tree the size of the palm of your hand." He only stands 86 cm. tall, but his aims and ambitions seem as high as a palm tree.

The eyes of the young audience are glued to this rather odd-looking character now on stage in the Fara'a community centre. Peals of laughter ring around the room as Nakhleh Ash-Shiber sends a simple yet very important message: the children's passport to life starts with their ability to read.

Nakhleh Ash-Shiber is a promotional device for the 'Passports to Reading' campaign launched by the Palestinian non-governmental organization the Tamer Institute for Community Education. The Institute is the brainchild of educationalist Munir Fasheh, who was deeply concerned about the deterioration in reading skills of thousands of Palestinian chidren as a result of the intifadah. The initiative has already significantly improved the reading skills of thousands of Palestinian children through encouraging them to read.

Nakhleh Ash-Shiber in performance

> The children's passport to life starts with their ability to read.

An interested youngster buys his or her first reading passport costing about 40 cents. Two thirds of the cost goes to support local libraries. He or she reads 12 books of his or her choice and has to answer questions about each book. The answers are checked by parents, teachers or librarians, the passport is stamped and another passport that has 15 visas for 15 books is issued.

NEW ADVENTURES

Each new passport takes the child on a new literary adventure. Tamer Institute has issued eight different passports to date to over 30,000 school children in the West Bank and Gaza. Saji at 13, is on his fourth passport, having travelled around the world through the books he has read so far.

Tamer's reading campaign which includes the passports to reading initiative, the Nakhleh Ash-Shiber performances and clubs, and the Nakhleh Ash-Shiber book series for children entitled "I do and understand", aims to overcome the many physical and psychological barriers to learning that exist in the occupied territory. By tackling the problems which in addition to the general security problems and Israeli censorship, include lack of reading materials and libraries, Tamer Institute hopes to create a rich reading environment.

The Institute is also dealing with the fact that reading for pleasure is often undervalued even if books are available. It is seen as a waste of time, distracting students from their school work. For Nakhleh and the staff at Tamer Institute the aim is simply to encourage reading for pleasure, creative writing and free expression – a difficult task in difficult circumstances.

Nakhleh with audience at Fara'a camp

AN OUTLET FOR IDEAS

Saji became very withdrawn after the arrest and imprisonment of his father. He now rarely speaks at home or outside. But he reads avidly and has found a way of expressing himself through writing short stories. His stories are now published under his name, in Nakhleh Ash-Shiber's weekly page in the Jerusalem Arabic language daily newspaper, al-Quds. Saji has found an outlet for his ideas.

Nakhleh, the contradictory character with his subtly delivered message, in addition to providing entertainment and enjoyment for young and old alike, has enabled them to turn their difficulties into powerful catalysts for change.

Back in Fara'a, the more the children laughed, and the more Nakhleh encouraged them to speak out in answer to his questions, the more Saji warmed up to this theatrical character. By the time the performance was drawing to an end, Saji's smiling face was adequate proof of what a little laughter and encouragement can do.

Al-Shallaleh quarter with the Gulf of Aqaba in the background.

Remote but not forgotten
the refugees of Aqaba

Economic difficulties in Jordan following the Persian Gulf War have led to the ´rediscovery´ of a group of Palestine refugees living in Aqaba.

Aqaba, at the southernmost tip of Jordan, on the Red Sea coast was out of the way for most of the Palestine refugees who fled to Jordan during and after the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. But it was here, where the borders of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel converge, that Mahmoud Ragheb Al-Haj Ibrahim chose to settle and set up a business.

Mahmoud, better known as Abu Al-Ragheb, runs the Al-Pasha restaurant in Aqaba city centre. Since 1953, he has been serving up foul (Egyptian-style beans, pronounced "fool") and hommos (mashed chick-peas), the most popular dishes for rich and poor alike in the Middle East, to an established clientele. "Before we came to Aqaba my father was offering these two dishes at his restaurant in our native town of Haifa in Palestine," said Abu Al-Ragheb. One of the factors that drew the family to Aqaba was that as a coastal port it had much in common with Haifa.

Aqaba in Arabic means "obstacle" or "barrier" because it was viewed by Muslim pilgrims travelling from Egypt and North Africa as an obstacle between them and their holy destination, Mecca in Saudi Arabia. But Aqaba was no obstacle for Abu Al-Ragheb, nor for the Palestine refugees who came from the Gaza and Beer Sheeba areas. "It was easier for those living in the southern part of Palestine to go to Egypt or to Aqaba than anywhere else," said Abu Al-Ragheb.

AN ECONOMIC SLUMP

It was almost noon, the part of the day when activity in the city usually subsides. Taxi, vans and heavy goods vehicles were mute. Inside the Al-Pasha Restaurant, a few workmen from the port were having brunch. Before the Persian Gulf crisis which began in 1990, the port was working to maximum capacity as the main conduit for Jordanian and Iraqi imports.

Aqaba prospered. But the post-war situation was different according to one of the workmen. "Now with UN sanctions against Iraq, activity in the city has almost come to a halt, except, to a limited extent, for those working in tourism. We can only get work two or three days a week these days."

Abu Al-Ragheb's customers are not only port hands. They also include fishermen. Business is not any better for fishermen, though for different reasons. One of them, Mohammed Abed Khater, complained that the average catch of 10 kilogrammes of fish was not enough to bring him a living wage. Mohammed, originally from Gaza, is one of only 100 fishermen left in

Aqaba. "The relatively shallow water, the narrow zone in which fishing is allowed, naval activity and adverse weather conditions have caused many fishermen to take up other jobs," said Mohammed. "Out of 350 licensed fishermen only one hundred still work in the business," he added.

Until 1991, UNRWA had never needed to build schools or health clinics for the refugees in Aqaba, since the refugees living there used local facilities. Until 1982, all registered refugees received rations under the general distribution programme. The programme was replaced by a new initiative which targeted food assistance for the poorest refugees. During times of full employment and relative prosperity, it was not a problem for the refugees. But things have changed – for the worse. The economic downturn in Aqaba led to the reemergence of this community of about 12,000 Palestine refugees who needed assistance from the Agency.

Abu Al-Ragheb outside the Al-Pasha Restaurant

TURNING TO UNRWA FOR HELP

In the face of rising unemployment and plummeting living standards in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, the refugees turned to UNRWA for help. The Agency responded quickly, sending a research team down to Aqaba. "The immediate result was the registration of some 150 families as special hardship cases," said UNRWA Relief and Social Services Officer in Jordan, Christine MacCallum. "One year later we opened the women's centre and the registration office in Al-Shallaleh where we felt the need was greatest."

The slum quarter of Al-Shallaleh lies about two kilometres to the east of the attractive tourist resort of Aqaba, often referred to as "Jordan's smiling mouth." The contrast could not be greater. In Al-Shallaleh, goats run through streets crammed with shabby brick houses roofed with zinc sheets. About 1800 families live here, most of them Palestinians. Many are of Bedouin origin and live from hand to mouth, raising livestock.

The slum quarter of Al-Shallaleh

In this poor quarter stands a neat building crowned with a UN flag. The one-storey apartment, which accommodates the new women's programme centre and a registration office, is UNRWA's only facility in Aqaba.

At the women's programme centre, the women from Al-Shallaleh and other parts of Aqaba attend courses in sewing, embroidery, hair dressing, flower-making and machine-knitting. One of the trainees, Maryam Taramseh said that economic conditions had deteriorated to the point where many women were interested in learning skills so that they could provide some income for their families. Maryam, whose husband is a casual labourer, is doing the sewing course. She hopes that when she finishes the course, she will be able to combine earning a small income at home with keeping watch over her family at the same time.

According to Christine MacCallum, the UNRWA registration office has updated the records of most of the Palestine refugees in Aqaba, raising the registered refugee population from about 3,000 persons in the eighties to some 12,000 in 1993, almost one quarter of Aqaba's total population. McCallum said that "the refugees in Aqaba had always found ways to get by there, but when the aftermath of the Gulf crisis devastated their ability to earn a living, UNRWA had to 'rediscover' them. I'm glad we were able to meet the challenge."

Cleaning up the camps

Two reports, from Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, the fields most seriously affected by deteriorating environmental health conditions, highlight one of the most urgent problems the Agency must deal with - the serious risks to health which thousands of Palestine refugees in the camps face 45 years after they became refugees.

Rubbish collection in Shatila camp, Lebanon

Lebanon

In 1974, just over 100,000 Palestine refugees lived in 15 camps in Lebanon. Today, over 170,000 of 328,000 registered Palestine refugees live in only 12 camps. Three camps were completely destroyed. Six of the camps suffered between ten and 50 per cent damage to shelters, infrastructure and Agency installations during the years of conflict in the country.

In most refugee camps in Lebanon, decaying water pipes laid in narrow alleyways run alongside open storm drains which carry storm water, sewage and other waste. Sewerage systems, often installed decades ago, are grossly inadequate for the increasing camp populations. Unplanned connections from houses to the water supply made by the refugees without technical considerations, have increased the risk of water contamination. Private septic tanks and pits often overflow and discharge waste into open storm water drains.

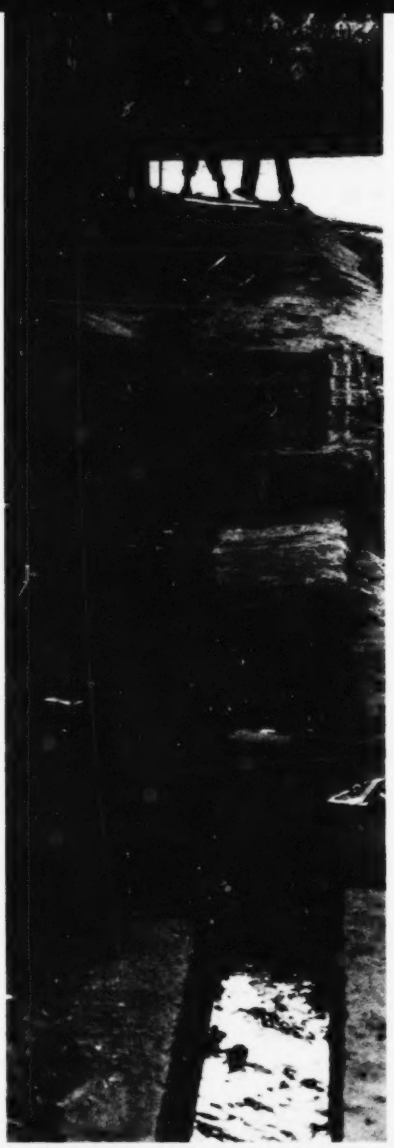
UNRWA sanitation labourers clean streets and open spaces daily. Agency vehicles remove solid wastes to 'open dump' disposal sites, usually operated by municipal authorities. If collection is delayed by, for example, vehicle breakdowns, collection points rapidly become breeding grounds for rodents and insects. UNRWA medical personnel have reported that the risk of infectious diseases is on the rise in the camps.

In 1991, the World Health Organization conducted an in-depth assessment of the environmental health conditions in the refugee camps in Lebanon. Following the report, the Agency launched a major appeal for US $12 million to tackle the most urgent needs in the camps. A minimal proportion of this amount has been received from donors, severely restricting the Agency's ability to carry out this task.

Over 330,000 of some 600,000 registered Palestine refugees in the Gaza Strip live in eight refugee camps. Population density within the camps ranges between 30,000 and 100,000 people per square kilometre in single storey housing. Only 20 per cent of houses in the camps are connected to sewers. The problem of untreated sewage in the environment is a major element in the environmental nightmare that is Gaza. The disposal of solid wastes is largely uncontrolled but in the camps, solid waste is collected and disposed of by UNRWA personnel .

The only source of water in the Gaza Strip is an underground reservoir which is being depleted three-and-a-half times faster than its annual replenishment from rainfall and the flow from aquifers and river systems to the east. The over pumping has caused water quality to decline and has contributed to the growing salination of underground water sources. Nitrate concentrations have increased from about twice the international standard in the early 1980s to over six times the standard today.

Under the conditions of occupation, responsibility for the environmental health sector is highly fragmented. Water resources are under the control of the Israeli authorities. Other routine services are carried out by local municipalities and by UNRWA.



A child plays in open drains in Beach camp

UNRWA has begun to develop a comprehensive environmental health plan for sustainable development in the Gaza Strip, including identifying specific needs and suggesting alternative strategies to meet these needs. In addition, the Agency has begun work to improve the seriously deteriorated sanitary environment in and around the Beach refugee camp, adjacent to Gaza town.

Some US $ 10.7 million were allocated to address environmental sanitation needs in the occupied territory in 1992 but the total cost of a comprehensive scheme is yet to be determined through feasability studies that UNRWA is carrying out.

According to UNRWA Associate Chief of External Relations Jabr Nabahin, "the size of the problem in Gaza is too large and complex to put a figure on it at this point, but is likely to go into the tens of millions of US dollars."

Members of the donor community have already expressed interest in providing funding for such a scheme. Specific projects for funding will be indentified as soon as the feasability studies are completed.

UNRWA sanitation labourer cleans up in Khan Younis camp, Gaza Strip

Creating opportunities:
women in Jaramana camp

Palestine refugee women in Jaramana camp in the Syrian Arab Republic are creating opportunities for themselves and exploiting them with the co-operation of UNRWA. During 1992, the Agency provided business skills training to over 9,000 women in its 67 women's programme centres in the Middle East.

This transcript of a television news clip produced by UNRWA, aired on CNN and Jordan Television in early 1993, tells the story of one refugee woman who has found a way to combine her responsibilities at home with supplementing her family's income.

UNRWA Reporter: *"Palestinians wander through Jaramana refugee camp in Syria. In 1948 this*

neighbourhood near Damascus had to absorb thousands of destitute refugees from what is now Israel. Today – more than 40 years on – the refugees have adapted to a new way of life. But old frustrations remain. "

Refugee from Jaramana camp: "Our lives are rather difficult. However hard you work, you don't earn enough to live."

"Wafiyyeh, her husband and five children live in one room. It's all they can afford. The family cannot survive on a single income, so both parents have to work. Wafiyyeh's day starts at 4 a.m. She is up before the rest of the family to get domestic chores out of the way. Then she gets the children ready for school. The older four can look after themselves, but Wafiyyeh takes three-year-old Qasim every day to a kindergarten run by refugee women in the camp.

UNRWA, The United Nations Relief And Works Agency, provided premises at its women's programme centre, and also assisted with training and

start-up funds. The kindergarten is a women's community initiative set up to support working mothers like Wafiyyeh who need to earn an income outside the home. Their income in turn creates new jobs for other women who work as kindergarten teachers, administrators and helpers in the centres."

Wafiyyeh: "I am a working woman. I help my husband to support the family. I've nobody to leave Qasim with, so I found a place where he can learn and be looked after."

"The women's programme centre also offers women the chance to learn new skills so that they can find employment and improve their standard of living."

Palestinian woman trainee: "I'd like to become a hairdresser. It's a

profession that will enable me to stand on my own two feet. I'll be financially independent"

"Wafiyyeh's day continues. she and a friend learned to sew at the UNRWA

centre, invested in an electric sewing machine and went into business, hemming towels for a damascene merchant. Hard work does not always reap rich rewards though. The pay is low and demand irregular.

Wafiyyeh's working day does not stop when she leaves the workshop. Back home most of the domestic responsibilities fall on her shoulders. But she represents thousands of underprivileged Palestinian women who have seized what opportunities are open to them in order to provide their families with a better life."

A week in Beirut – September 1982

Magnus Ehrenström behind his desk in Lebanon

Former UNRWA staff member, Magnus Ehrenström returned to Lebanon in 1982 on a temporary assignment for the Agency. He wrote this account of one particularly intense week in September, when he was acting as Director of UNRWA Operations in Lebanon. Eleven years on, UNRWA is addressing the human cost of some of the scenes that he describes; but it is an uphill struggle.

We arrived in an almost annihilated town, and put up at the Holiday Home, an apartment hotel close to the beach in Beirut. In Ba'albek there had been no office at all. In Beirut there was at least the semblance of an office. The Lebanon Field Office had originally been situated in the northeastern part of the town but when the fighting in and around Tel el Za'atar camp started, the office was moved to a high building in the southern part of West Beirut. During the Israeli invasion in 1982, the building was shelled and partly destroyed and the office moved once again to the Agency's Central Warehouse in the Rue Verdun. It was a shabby, badly-located place with heavy traffic on all sides, but was adequate for UNRWA's reduced operation.

After a three-day handover, the Director, John Defrates, left for a well-deserved holiday - only to return a few hours later. The road north was impassable. I still remained as Acting Director to give him some respite. The week of the 13 to 20 September 1982 was one of the most intense I have ever experienced.

I am sure that most people thought that Beirut was on its way to a better life. Lebanon had a new president waiting to take office and there was some hope that Israel would now stop its advance. But President-elect Bashir Gemayel was assassinated on Tuesday 14 September. Initial reports said that he was safe, but the truth came out the next day. His body had been identified by his wedding ring; 25 others had died with him.

SHOOTING IN THE SOUTH

The night of Wednesday/Thursday was filled with shooting and artillery shelling in the south of the city. We had our staff meeting as usual at eight o'clock on Thursday morning and I warned my colleagues that we might have to evacuate the office soon. We were just seven international and two Palestinian staff left in the office. My diary entry reads: "The firing increases - every five minutes the crack of bazookas and thunder of tank-guns comes nearer. Rounds of automatic guns lash the streets and also hit UNRWA's Central Warehouse. Since we only have one exit from the compound I must now take the decision to evacuate the premises."

We got out at the very last minute - at 0915 - just before the building was taken over by fighting units. For the rest of the day we had to confine ourselves to the Holiday

Home, where we could see some of the battle. For me it was reminiscent of Swedish army exercises. The difference was that this was for real.

Little by little the shooting diminished and a sort of calm followed. We invited a few of the staff for a drink. Suddenly bazookas and tanks fired violently in our street and the house opposite our hotel was hit. The main target was the Murabitoun Headquarters, some 50 metres away. We had no electricity and only a few candles, but somehow we managed to sleep through the night.

The UNRWA Field Office, Beirut, October 1982

RUMOURS ABOUT SHATILA

The next morning we returned to the office and started as usual with the staff meeting. There were lots of rumours flying around about Shatila camp. I dispatched three reconnaissance teams to the north, east and south of the city to ascertain whether the roads out of the city were open. I also asked them to visit the Shatila and Burj el-Barajneh refugee camps.

I tried to go to the camps but we had to turn back because of the fighting and the shooting around the Cité Sportive and Shatila. I went south and tried another route which avoided the centre of battle. Shatila was in the thick of the fighting. Unable to reach the camp, I made a quick visit to the Ministry of Defence and then cabled UNRWA Headquarters in Vienna.

The next day our worst fears were confirmed. Two weeping women appeared in the office to report a massacre in Shatila camp. Two of our staff had been to the camp and had reported seeing a lot of bodies. My immediate thought was to get the news out in the hope that this might help to prevent the slaughter from spreading to the other camps.

Two weeping women appeared in the office to report a massacre in Shatila camp.

I immediately went to the office of the International Committee of the Red Cross and to the UN Secretary-General's representative in Lebanon where I found that the news had already been cabled around the world.

AN UNBELIEVABLE SIGHT

Next morning I decided to go personally to Shatila. Journalists had swarmed into my office and I had to be able to give them clear facts. After many attempts, I entered the camp and found an unbelievable sight. I shall not go into detail but I have to say that I forced myself to impress all these horrors on my mind so I would never forget them. Survivors and relatives returned slowly to the camp weeping hysterically when they found their dead. Many of them were virtually unrecognizable. On my way out, a new grave was discovered containing 27 bodies - more cries, more tears.

A GREAT RELIEF

A very hectic period then began, with a busy exchange of cables between the UN Secretary-General, the Commissioner-General and others. Much had to be done. The camp had to be cleared, sanitation had to be attended to and measures had to be taken to protect the remaining refugees. It was a great relief for them when Italian and French troops arrived in the camps.

When I returned to the office that Sunday, the 19th of September, I heard yet more bad news. One of our most reliable Palestinian staff members, the acting Area Officer in Beirut, Ali Minawi, had been killed when his apartment was hit by heavy shelling. He must have had a premonition that his time was at an end because he told his family to leave and was sitting alone with a cup of tea. My diary entry for that day reads: "How long a day can be! A light-year."

Lebanon–

July 1993

A Palestinian woman salvages what she can of her makeshift home in the Cité Sportive

The scars of conflict ...

More than a decade later, some 30,000 displaced Palestinians remain homeless in Lebanon, living in temporary, substandard accommodation as a result of the events that Magnus Ehrenström describes, as well as the 16 years of civil conflict in Lebanon. On 5 July 1993, eighteen displaced Palestine refugee families were forced to leave their squat in the derelict Cité Sportive when reconstruction work began. At print time, UNRWA was trying to accommodate them in 20 rehabilitated shelters in Shatila camp.

This is only the tip of the iceberg though. At least six thousand Palestine refugee families in Lebanon are living in unoccupied basements, plastic or tin shacks or on the streets. The Agency is trying to tackle the huge problem of finding housing for the displaced, but only has funds to rehabilitate about 100 shelters in 1993.

... remain

Shatila today. Three floors have caved in over this man's home

Children playing among the ruins of Shatila

Displaced refugees living in tin shacks in the Beqa'a valley

today

IMPRIME A TAXE REDUITE